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Triple Trouble: Biennials and Art Fairs Under Discussion.
Reviewing Three Books

Abstract

There is a growing number of sources on the subjects of biennials and fairs. Reviewing three recently published books about art fairs and biennials presents us an opportunity to discuss fresh research on openly market-driven exhibitions (art fairs) and ostensibly less commercial ventures (biennials and the large-scale exhibitions). Arguing for the independence of biennials from the art market, and benefiting from a multidisciplinary perspective, the three publications add innovative knowledge to an issue that still arouses some criticism. *Double Trouble in Exhibiting the Contemporary: Fairs and Biennials* edited by Cristina Baldacci, Clarissa Ricci and Angela Vettese; *From Roman Feria to Global Art Fair, From Olympia Festival to Neo-liberal Biennial. On the 'Biennialization' of Art Fairs and the 'Fairization' of Biennials*, by Paco Barragán; and *Biennials. The Exhibitions we Love to Hate* by Rafal Niemojewski, will be here analysed in terms of their structure and their contribution to the subject.

Keywords

Art Fairs, Biennials, Biennialization, Exhibitions, Contemporary

Triple Trouble: Biennials and Art Fairs Under Discussion. Reviewing Three Books

Adelaide Duarte and Lígia Afonso

1. The theme of art fairs and biennials

2022 is a remarkable year with respect to biennials, insofar as the pandemic forced some of the most relevant events of this kind to coincide in a single year following their earlier postponement: the Venice Biennale, documenta of Kassel, Manifesta in Pristina, Istanbul Biennial and the Berlin Biennial. These are all major platforms for the validation of the latest artistic trends in the midst of notable artworld agents and an international audience. If contemporary art lovers add the Art Basel fair, and the newest Paris + Art Basel to this grouping, we find an experience for travellers in search of iconic large-scale exhibitions not unlike the historical Grand Tour, following the original idea of the historical cultural education of the upper classes from the 17th century onward.

In addition to this bumper 2022 calendar are a growing number of sources on the subjects of biennials and fairs. This review of three recently published books about art fairs and biennials shows we are experiencing a period of prolific growth in their popularity. This presents us with an opportunity to discuss fresh research on openly market-driven exhibitions (art fairs) and ostensibly fewer commercial ventures (biennials and the large-scale exhibitions). These publications reveal new perspectives and theoretical outlooks that scholars and independent researchers bring to a wider readership beyond academics and students, examining similarities in the infrastructure underpinning these events, their strategies, formats and different features, and the 'blurred boundaries' between them. Theoreticians and practitioners have been compelled to reevaluate the inherent complexities of art fairs and biennials following the transformation of the contemporary art system over time, the advent of a global scale in the art world since the year 2000, and the general global dissemination of art fairs and biennials. This involves a recognition of the fluidity of the roles of the various actors in the market, the growing use of digital commercial tools, the circulation and reception of artworks and the spread of information: issues which have been placed in the spotlight through archival research, revision of primary sources and catalogues, and a reframing of history.

These three books offer an opportunity to dig further down into this topic. Arguing for the independence of biennials from the art market, and benefiting from a multidisciplinary perspective, the three publications add innovative knowledge to an issue that still arouses some criticism. *Double Trouble in Exhibiting the Contemporary: Fairs and Biennials* is edited by three scholars, Cristina Baldacci, Clarissa Ricci and Angela Vettese, who each have theoretical expertise in the field of

large-scale events. The volume gathers various academic contributions from an international conference in Bologna in 2018. *From Roman Feria to Global Art Fair, From Olympia Festival to Neo-liberal Biennial. On the 'Biennialization' of Art Fairs and the 'Fairization' of Biennials* is by Paco Barragán, a curator with substantial experience curating art fairs and in theoretical reflection through various published books and articles. *Biennials. The Exhibitions we Love to Hate* is by Rafal Niemojewski, a cultural producer and scholar of contemporary art and its institutions. As a specialist on the subject of the biennial, Niemojewski has been working in the Biennial Foundation since its inception and became the organisation's director in 2016.

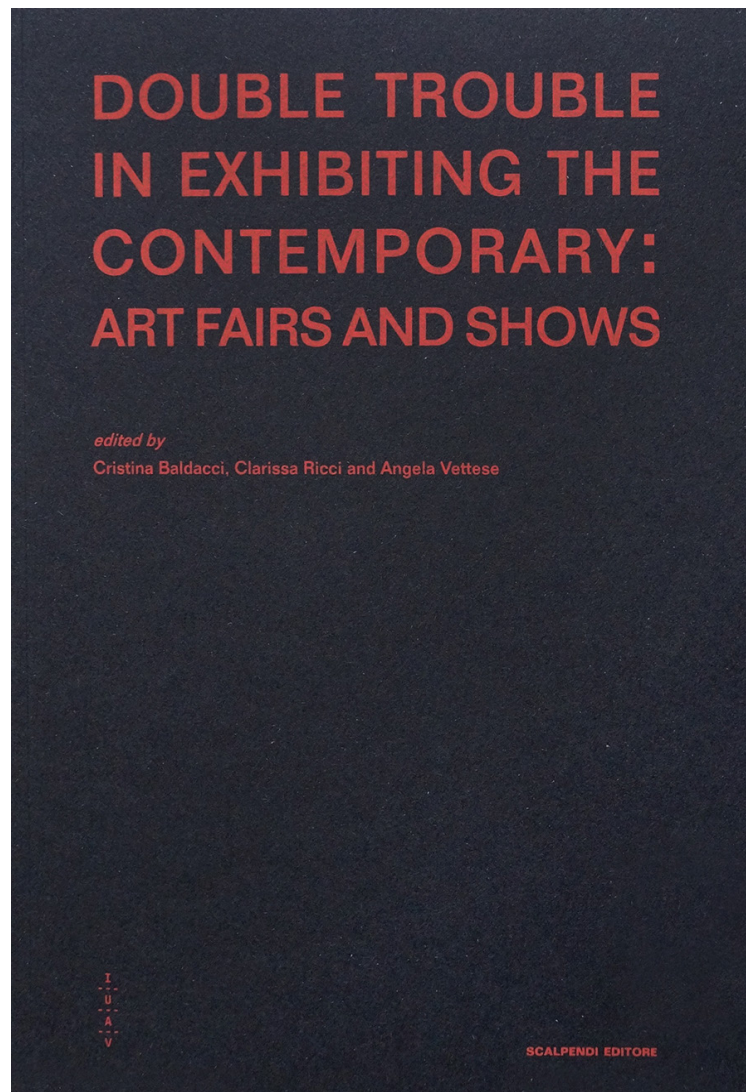
2. The Books' Structure

2.1 *Double Trouble in Exhibiting the Contemporary: Fairs and Biennials*

The book is organised into three chapters: the first two with three articles each, the last chapter with four. Contributions appear to be well balanced. The main focus is on the intersections between the art market and biennials and large-scale exhibitions, for which the authors use archival documentation, catalogues, academic papers, newspaper articles and a comprehensive chronologically assembled range of sources.

The book starts by examining an ambiguous feature of the current art system: the expected distinction between biennials and art fairs regarding market issues. The provocative question the authors raise – *Why then not go back to selling artworks openly as it was for early biennials?* – can be perceived as a guide to their chosen perspective, highlighting the historically distrustful relationship between the art market and the art exhibition as they grow increasingly alike.

Angela Vettese introduces the subject with the article entitled “Entre le Chien et Loup: Fairs and Life Cycle in Contemporary Art”. The author assumes that the contemporary art fair is the main stage to forge an artist's path. Her argument begins at the art fair's role in promoting the artist's career, criticising the normalisation of permeability with regards to actors' continuously changing roles. The author stresses the dealers' initiatives in legitimising aesthetics that are not so “palatable”, such as conceptual art or the Zero group, or even the market's effort to sell particularly challenging art such as Christo and Jeanne-Claude's environmental statements. Vettese underlines the need for an intersection between the market and other legitimising factors such as criticism or referential museum exhibitions to validate artists. Gerard Richter is the main example given by the author of the osmosis between market, exhibitions and criticism, an argument reinforced with up-to-date data. The author uses the idea of the “life cycle” to understand the interest art arouses, the innovation strategies followed, and the psychology of art consumers, concluding with a close reading that determines the “life cycle” of an artist. In closing, and apparently moving away from the theme of the intersection between exhibitions and art fairs, Vettese points the compass towards art fairs, questioning their chosen paths of development.



2.1.1 Chapter 1, “Raising the Common Ground”, gathers three articles with historical perspectives that ontologically question the dichotomies between art fairs and biennials, the art market and the avant-garde, and the coincidence between the end of sales at the Venice Biennale and the beginning of the Bologna art fair. The chosen title suggests a shared stage to both structures, besides their idiosyncrasies.

The first contribution belongs to Terry Smith, “Biennials/Art Fairs in the Exhibition Complex”. Adopting the perspective of an overview, the author interrogates the way future research will observe issues relating to the biennials and art fairs of today, which some theoreticians stress as “*the* defining factor in making contemporary art contemporary” in “the artworld”. Questioning which is dominant between the art fair and the biennial, the author points to the growing number of both phenomena, their global character and their historical concentration in Western European capitals and the USA. The main point would seem to be measuring the impact of these “structural components”, considering other exhibition platforms for visual art, their influence on “shaping local artworlds”, and the institutional “settings in which art is made, seen and interpreted”, according to their different formats. Smith critically challenges the distinction between biennials and art fairs, namely their “core constitutions”: the fair being “orchestrated around the point of sale”, and the biennial aimed at “showing how art made in many parts of the globalised world today is negotiating its necessary distance and its necessary implication in that world”. He concludes that the blurring of the distinction between both “depends on where you are standing, and what you want to see when you look”, highlighting the relevance of perspective.

Bruce Altshuler, in “The Art Market and Exhibition of the Avant-Garde”, also refers to the blurred boundaries between the “commercial artworld” and the “so-called not-for-profit realm of museums, large-scale international exhibitions and other art institutions”, stressing that it is “naïve” to view a separation between them. His argument is rooted in the major motivation for artists to organise exhibitions, with many of them, since Impressionism, exhibiting in commercial art galleries. The author analyses modern art exhibitions, from the Blaue Reiter artists to Malevich, Picasso and Rauschenberg, pointing to the complicity and involvement of art dealers, an essential player even in museum exhibitions. He finds a parallel between the modern period and the influence of the market in artistic value, stressing the need for an “ethical questioning of this relationship”.

The last article of the first chapter is by Clarissa Ricci, “Between a Fair and a Biennial: Comparing the End of Sales at the Venice Biennale and the Beginning of the Arte Fiera in Bologna”. Here, the author analyses the years the Venice Biennale changed its “proto-fair system” of financially supporting artists into a “contemporary biennale format” (1968-1972) focused on being a “platform for art production” as much as a place for contemporary art discussion. The first art fair in Italy, the Arte Fiera, emerged at this same time. The author mentions that despite the closure of the sales office at the Venice Biennale, Bologna had the commercial infrastructure to create an art market, showing from the outset a desire for public education through art and the need for contemporary art to find legitimation through the creation of collateral cultural programming, a strategy that has since become popular.

2.1.2 Chapter 2, “Fading the Line Between Exhibition and Artwork”, investigates the “life cycle of artworks”. The authors engage with the nature and connections of the exhibition’s narrative today, offering a complementary perspective on the complexity of the relationship between art fairs and biennials.

In the first article, “Dematerializing in the Contemporary Present”, Jacob Lund mentions the historical context of the dematerialisation of the material supports of art in the conceptualism of the 1960s to further analyse the “contemporaneity” of the present. He critically explores the “complexities of the digital” in a global capitalist society through media and computational technology, using artistic examples such as Hito Steyern’s video piece to argue for its contribution towards transforming contemporary art into the “immaterial aesthetically perceptible”.

John Rajchman, in “Lyotard’s ‘Résistance’ Today”, goes further in the discussion of the transformation of the artworld post-1989, summarising the main changes with the dissemination of biennials, art fairs, auction houses and private museums, and questioning “resistance” and exhibition practices today through a critical discussion of art forms within that context. The author questions today’s “curationism” and strategies of presenting things in light of Lyotard’s notion of resistance (including the exhibition *Les Immatériaux* he curated at the Centre Pompidou in 1985, and his articulation of the postmodern condition as the exhaustion of “grand narratives”) as a point of theoretical reference for understanding contemporary society’s drift towards “de-globalization”.

The last contribution is by Cristina Baldacci, “Re-Edit, Re-Enact, Remediate: The Exhibition as Time-Based Artwork (Philippe Parreno)”. The author analyses the “impermanent artwork” of an exhibition as a “work of art in itself”, or as “pure mediality” through the participation of visitors. Her argument is based on the study of Parreno’s artistic work, considered here as a follower of “the legacy of the avant-garde movements in joining life and art”, and for whom Lyotard’s *Les Immatériaux* was seen as an exhibition model. She stresses the relevance of the performance of the body as a contribution to the “endless ‘hypotheses’” of perceptions and interpretations of the “time-based exhibition”.

2.1.3 Chapter 3, “Unfolding Globalized Reception”, focuses on the reception of audiences to exhibitions and underlying factors such as media, criticism, sales and buyer behaviour. Provenance research enlightens an opaque history of exhibition, and the dissemination of art fairs and biennials provokes the figure of the “exhausted

spectator”. The function of art periodicals is also highlighted in the chapter as a way to legitimate and make artworks and artists visible, using examples such as Frieze and the Venice Biennale catalogues.

In “The Brief Impact of Art Fairs on Prices”, Jean Minguet recalls the art fair’s relevance as a marketplace and exhibition space, as well as its role in providing opportunities for galleries to present and promote their programmes and artists. The main point of the chapter, however, is the (non)disclosure of the prices of artworks, which keeps the prices charged at international art fairs from being understood. Dealers also do not reveal the prices of private transactions. Although this situation is well known, it is relevant not only from a financial point of view but also concerning the lack of transparency in the art market itself. The author stresses the importance of auction sales as “the best source of information to conduct research on the art market” and uses a comparative analysis between auction catalogues and art fairs to note a high volatility in prices in the former, particularly in the case of masterpieces. Minguet concludes by arguing for the omission of information concerning the provenance of artworks previously purchased at art fairs in auction catalogues, suggesting this would not be positive information (in the sense of protecting the confidentiality of the seller). At the same time, he also suggests that auction catalogues may be a source of relevant information to legitimise artworks in the market and that art fairs seem to be primarily mercantile events.

In “The Exhausted Spectator: Criticism Amidst Mega Exhibitions in the 21st Century”, Jörg Heiser examines the diminishing role of art criticism among large-scale exhibitions, events that, along with art fairs, have grown immensely since the new millennium. Besides the effect of attracting “more visitors, more artists, and more moral authority”, the author emphasises the advent of the “exhausted spectator” in light of the “sheer volume” of artworks offered by these mega exhibitions, pointing to the issue of a lack of criticism amid curators concerning matters such as globalised diversity, inclusion, representation and the need to discuss curatorial choices.

In “Between Page, Market, and Exhibition: Art Magazines in the Context of Art Fairs and Biennials”, Gwen Allen gives attention to the function of art magazines in determining the value of art, noting that magazines are just one type of publicity. The author seeks to understand the power of art magazines amid the rise of biennials and art fairs, the “fairennial complex” and their impact in transforming information into economic and “cultural capital”, while exploring the role of art criticism in this context. Allen argues that art magazines are at the very centre of the artworld, “where the buying and selling of art meet its critical evaluation and interpretation”. Indeed, there are specific booths featuring publications at most art fairs and biennials. But at the same time, the author points to a change in the format of the art magazine, offering a more quantitative perspective over qualitative work, shifting from in-depth interpretative and analytical contents to a progressive erosion of criticism in the pursuit of new audiences. Using *frieze* magazine as example, Allen underlines that “as art writing has been instrumentalised and integrated into the market, the critical evaluation of art becomes more and more subservient to it, and the power of the critic has declined”. Nonetheless, the author concludes that art magazines operate “as both promotional, commercial forms of publicity and critical, experimental sites of display and critique”.

In the last contribution, “Magnifying the Margins: Art Magazines in the Contemporary art System”, by Camilla Salvaneschi, the author examines several examples of art magazines published in recent decades, noting their intensified role in the “contemporary artworld by participating in the market and its institutions”. She points out how magazines “have been manipulated by art institutions and serve to legitimise galleries, art fairs, museums and biennials” in order to gain visibility. The author then takes a historical perspective, examining the first magazine published by a biennial (from the Venice Biennale) at a time when Venice was both a fair and a biennial, historically testifying to the relationship of both purposes from early on. Other biennials soon followed Venice’s example, creating magazines to record the “discursive exhibition”. The author presents *documenta X documents* as a magazine that is less commercial, launched as a theoretical volume to explore the process

of research which aimed to fill the gap between iterations and make documenta “a durable institution”. The author reveals similarities between biennials and magazines, namely their periodical formats, the need for criticism to guide audiences to understand curatorial choices, and for the purposes of legitimation. She concludes that the magazine is a “promotor of events of international and local resonance and a vehicle to legitimise its parent institution”.

2.2 From Roman Feria to Global Art Fair, From Olympia Festival to Neo-liberal Biennial. On the 'Biennialization' of Art Fairs and the 'Fairization' of Biennials



On the 'Biennialization' of Art Fairs and the 'Fairization' of Biennials

Paco Barragán

With Artoons by Pablo Helguera

This book is organised into four chapters. The first two are devoted to fairs and biennials respectively; the latter two present a mixture of the features of both events that had previously distinguished them. The author underlines the fluidity of the concepts 'Biennialization' and 'Fairization', which have undergone some cross-pollination in contemporary thought. While Paco Barragán has already contributed theoretically to linking the rise of the art fair with the rise of the curator, in this volume he goes deeper, using a comparative method which moves between art fairs and biennials to recover their historical roots and understand how they converged in the late 1980s.

In the introduction, Barragán presents the theme through a cartoon by Pablo Helguera showing a man who faces a dilemma within the contemporary artworld: choose the documenta path of exhibition; or pick the Basel art fair path. Barragán seeks to expand the dilemma to a distinction between two antagonistic paths, suggesting audiences face an opposition between art history and the art market. He appropriates the irony and metaphors that Helguera encapsulates so brilliantly throughout the entire volume.

2.2.1 Chapter 1 is entitled “A Genealogy of the Art Fair: From Roman *Feria* to Global Art Fair” and aims to trace the origins of the “fair”, underling its development and connections with trade. While, according to the author, “it is more than wise to trace the origins of our fair to pre-modern times [...] as it goes hand in hand with the origins of religion, trading, traditional markets, market economy and money”, in introducing the fair’s typologies the author fails to explain why it is necessary to go far back in time when fairs and the trade in artworks are such distinct phenomena. A proper contextualisation would be desirable to clarify its distinctiveness, and most of all, its contribution to our present understanding of fair and art trade.

The four subsections of the chapter constitute the substrate of the genealogy of the fair, which is Barragán’s distinctive contribution to the subject. He divides the typologies into macro-historical categories, thus creating the illusion of a successive line of facts and empty spaces between them. The last, “The Art Fair: From the Salon via the Modern and Contemporary to the Global Art Fair (1884-1989)”, with its descriptive title, covers a century and corresponds to the point where the author examines the art fair proper.

Barragán shows the key moments from the French *Salon des Indépendants* to the contemporary Global Art Fair, tracing distinctive features such as the idea of an annual exhibition and artist run activities until the Modern Art Fair (1913), with this last based on the Armory Show in New York. The Armory Show also used an artist’s run model, with curated sections, an international focus, and an innovative communication strategy. Although held but once, the author notes the exhibition left a “lasting impression” in the North American artistic milieu. The author then focuses on the Contemporary Art Fair model, which shifted focus from the artist to the art dealer-manager, who took on an increasingly central role working on the booths. This model emerged with Art Cologne and Art Basel (1967-79), with the former losing primacy to the second “because they basically catered for galleries from Western Europe and the United State”, a characteristic not so distinct from the previous Modern Art Fair Model.

The last category covered by Barragán’s text is the Global Art Fair (post-1989), where the curator plays a central role and closely collaborates with dealers and collectors to create the “core of the new system”. The fair is organised by curatorial sections, discussion panels and conferences. The theoretical programme features the participation of international art professionals and parallel activities such as museum openings, special receptions, and visits to collectors’ houses. Management is a key element of success and represents “the paradigm of the ‘economy experience’”, meaning that art fairs offer both the expected artworks and new experiences to audiences. The ARCO fair of Madrid is a leading example of this last model, as it “invented [...] what other art fairs [...] were [...] obliged to copy”.

2.2.2 Chapter 2, “A Genealogy of the Biennial: From Olympia Festival to Neo-liberal Biennial”, replicates the subsections of Chapter 1. While the former chapter presents a historical path up to the ‘global art fair’, the second, the genealogy of the biennale, arrives at a ‘neo-liberal’ context for the same post-1989 period, presenting the designation of typologies of a mostly psychological and behavioural nature (such as experiential, traumatic, resistant, and so on).

Before specifying its various typologies, the chapter begins with an account of the origins of the biennial, with Barragán pointing out its beginnings

in classical antiquity with the Olympia Festival (782 B.C.E.) and culmination in the Grand Tour of the 17th century. Over this long arc of history, he posits that various shared ideas underpin both Olympia and Venice: “competition, patriotism, prizes”, and “glory and fame”. He understands the Old Master blockbuster in Italy as a “vehicle that positively affected the emergence of the Venice Biennial” due to the idea of the spectacle of the exhibition and to the creation of an “ephemeral museum”. He also observes the Grand Tour, underlining its aim of disseminating knowledge and improving taste among the upper classes as much as the stimulation of an art market for antiquities. Barragán later identifies the “modern origins” of the biennial in the Salons from the 17th century and exhibitions like the London Universal Exhibition (1851), the Paris Impressionist exhibition (1874), and the Munich Glass Palace (1886, 1888).

Barragán examines the biennial typologies in four subsections, seeking “to convey the working field” and to present the, largely academically unknown, Spanish-speaking biennials, in addition to referring to the iconic events of Venice, documenta and Manifesta. In so doing, Barragán first systematises the scholarship of other authors regarding the organisational structure of biennials, considering the conditions in which they were founded and the phases of their development, while referring to four concepts to reveal their motivations and history (*experience, trauma, resistance and neo-liberalism*) and claiming that certain biennials fit into more than one category.

The first, *experience*, examines the pioneering Venice, São Paulo and Sydney biennials (1895-1970) as a “field of cultural production”, “determined by [...] experience and experimentation”. The author revisits the chronology of biennials, criticising the dominant narrative that leaves behind several initiatives such as the 1st Hispano-American Biennial, which took place almost concurrently with the São Paulo biennial, in 1951.

The second, the *trauma* biennial, is “steeped in the dialectic art-politics”, particularly in the cold war context, a concept Barragán takes from Okwui Enwezor when he referred to biennials as a “response to traumatic historical events”. documenta, for example, was a tool of “rehabilitation” for the “post-war German public [...] with international modernism”. The Hispano-American Biennial created during the Franco dictatorship, the Gwangju Biennale launched after the massacre of students in the Korean city of Gwangju (1980), and Prospect New Orleans are other examples of the trauma biennale as remedy for social and historical trauma.

The third category is the *resistance* biennale, a category appropriated from Marta Traba’s concept of resistance art. The idea is of a resistance to “colonisation” taken from a “global South” perspective, an alternative to the “Euro-centric, internationalist Venice and documenta”. The Havana Biennial is offered as an example of a “counter-narrative to the Western biennial exhibition”, as are the Asia Pacific Triennale and the Berlin Biennale.

The last category is the *neo-liberal* biennale, which Barragán frames as “corporativist culturalist” due to interference from private corporations in publicly funded events. The author’s purpose is to identify the origins of today’s global biennials and their features, including the “collective authorial curatorship” model, international artists and audiences, the predominance of “conceptual and new media art”, the “white cube” exhibition model, collateral activities, an education programme, and an evolution under the umbrella of neo-liberalism. Barragán takes the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale, curated by Okwui Enwezor in 1997, as an example, an event which brought South Africa, and Africa in general, into focus around a discussion of globalisation as a “point of departure”, reflecting on topics such as post-colonialism, multiculturalism and bringing attention to non-mainstream artists. This theoretical path was supported by other biennials including documenta 11—also curated by Okwui Enwezor—which “became *the* model for today’s global neo-liberal biennial”, Manifesta and other examples launched from 1989 onward.

In the following two chapters, Chapter 3 “On the ‘Biennialization’ of Art Fairs” and Chapter 4 “On the ‘Fairization’ of Biennials”, Barragán continues his previous research (*The Art Fair Age*, published in 2008) by underlining the cate-

gorical ambivalence of art fairs and biennials and examining how their distinctive features and functions have grown increasingly intermixed in order to make them more attractive.

2.2.3 In Chapter 3, Barragán explains the concept of “biennialization” as a “generic term that embraces the ongoing neo-liberal symbiosis of art fairs and biennials in today’s artworld”. Art fairs have developed strategies and forms of art representation similar to those of the biennial working process. This shift from dealer to curator of the global art fair began in 1994 with ARCOmadrid Country Focus, particularly with the invitation of documenta curator Jan Huet to curate a special section with galleries from Belgium. This was the first step of a new era in art fair methodology that valued “artistic respectability”, including professional curators, critics and historians in the management staff.

2.2.4 In Chapter 4, Barragán explains the concept of “fairization” as the “ongoing ‘commercial’ and ‘commodified’ nature of biennials whose performance was more aligned with art fair’s strategies, directed towards the market and sales”. He argues that the biennial goes hand in hand with sales, city branding and cultural tourism. He cites how the Venice Biennale’s erstwhile sales office was converted into a more sophisticated form of transaction in recent decades. He also mentions the hybrid origins of documenta, stating that before it became the “most important platform for sanctioning art trends and aesthetic attitudes” it engaged in correspondence with the art market through the presence of art galleries. In closing, he points to the curator’s role in the process of commodification and characterises the global neo-liberal biennial, noting a hybridisation of both events.

The author finalises his thoughts by comparing the widely disseminated concepts of global and contemporary art, arguing they represent a “nostalgia for the present”. At the same time, he concludes that the neo-liberal context of biennials and art fairs demands a cohabitation between commodification and the “aura” of the artwork.

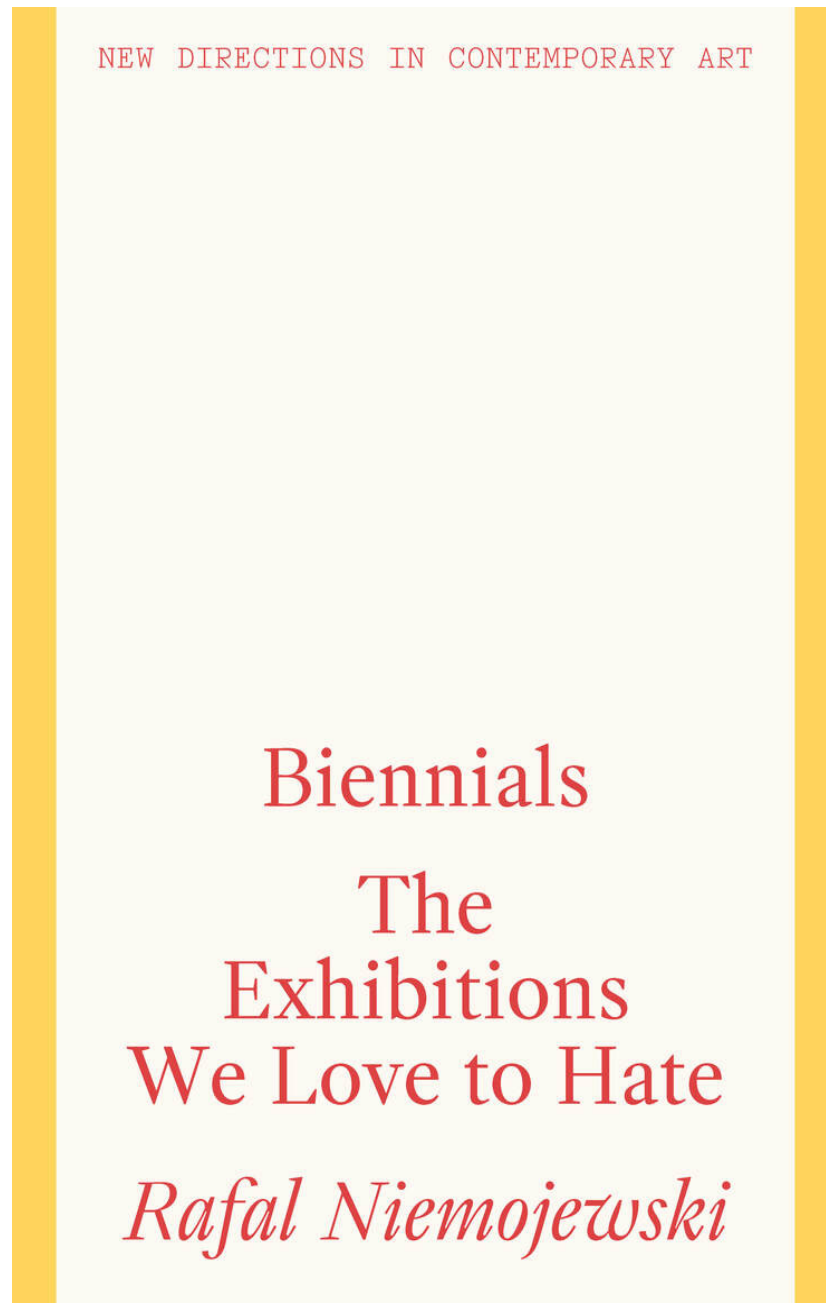
2.3 Biennials: The Exhibitions we Love to Hate

Written by Rafal Niemojewski, *Biennials: The Exhibitions We Love to Hate* was published in 2021 by Lund Humphries as the first book of its New Directions in Contemporary Art series. The book examines the proliferation of biennials and their historical inscription in the contemporary world, from the 1980s to the outbreak of the pandemic. Didactic and accessible, the book offers a summary of biennials and their most important concepts and transitions, illustrating these with well-known case studies and providing a comparative analysis of the words and critical positioning of their advocates and detractors. Examining the contradictory critical, curatorial and political discourses surrounding biennials, unlike the two preceding texts, the book avoids comparing biennials with other cultural phenomena such as art fairs.

The title of the book is an unstated reference to the artist, writer and musician John Miller’s essay “The Show You Love to Hate – a Psychology of the Mega-Exhibition”, first published in the journal *Texte zur Kunst* (Cologne, 1992), then in the fundamental anthology *Thinking about Exhibitions* (Routledge, New York, 1996), and, more recently, in the manual *MIB – Men in Black: Handbook of Curatorial Practice* (Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin and Revolver-Archiv für aktuelle Kunst, Frankfurt am Main, 2004).

Miller’s text diagnoses and critically discusses the ideology of the mega-exhibition as an institution, exemplified by the reception of Jan Hoet’s documenta 9 as an anachronistic and predictable ritual, sustained by the media phenomenon of generating expectation, disappointment and rejection, a negative and cynical condition that, he contends, has become chronic. Avoiding his own scepticism, however, Miller calls for action to transform the factors of dissatisfaction, suggesting we change the rules of the game to address the problem.

Niemojewski, however, evinces a clearly corporate perspective, with the aim of dismantling the polemic and controversy in which contemporary art biennials have been sceptically framed, long preceding, but witnessed most intensely, since the turn of the millennium, with their format, relevance and sustainability being systematically called into question and fashionably criticised. After all, his job as director of the Biennial Foundation—an organisation he claims functions as an independent observer—is to solve the biennials' continuing existential crisis by avoiding, for example, negative theorisations which define them as neo-liberal commodities (such as Barragan's "fairization").



2.3.1 In Chapter 1, 'Biennialization and its counternarratives', Niemojewski surveys the pros and cons of the proliferation of biennials, highlighting their role in the development of theoretical debates on contemporary art, in their absorption of terminologies and concepts from other disciplinary areas, in the promotion of artistic practices that are difficult to frame in a museum, in stimulating the mobility

of artists and works, and in the complexification of the work of the curator. He also claims that they have weakened traditional artistic practices and disturbed the art market value chain, since value is no longer solely aggregated to museums.

Arguing that biennials reshaped contemporary art, whose calendar became as much oriented by them as by the art fairs and major exhibitions in main museums, Niemojewski defines a chronology for this transition. First, in the mid-1980s, when pre-globalised biennials appeared in non-hegemonic territories, such as La Habana, Cairo or Istanbul, and challenged the Western status quo and dominant power relations based on a world cartography inherited from modernity. Then, from 1989, when biennials proliferated with the new world order that resulted from the fall of the Berlin wall and spread from South America to Asia as legitimising and competing instruments of the newly globalised and growing economies and cities.

Niemojewski then points to “the strange case of arithmomania in the art world”, which emerged from the intense scrutiny of this exponential growth and which intensifies critically at the turn of the millennium. Biennials are criticised by authors such as Carolyn Christiv-Bakargiev, Joshua Decter, Jana Reena, Robert Nickas and Glenn Lowry, who point to the division between bored critics (“does the world really need another biennial...?”) and professionalised curators (who will soon also bemoan an inevitable, and fashionable, “biennial fatigue” or “biennial burnout”) when discussing the “biennialization” phenomenon. The judgement will be based mainly on the concomitance between the role of biennials, the political agenda of cities and the leisure industry; the role of the biennial as a mechanism of homogenisation and dissemination of the Western canon given the recurrence of particular works, artists and curators; and the production of biennials as spectacles of liberalism, engines of a specifically produced biennial art: monumental, media-friendly and intended for immediate consumption. The “biennial is dead”, stated Daniel Birbaum in 2007, before curating another, even as they began to decline with the onset of the global economic crisis.

Niemojewski remains, however, an unyielding defender of the format, embracing a model that, based on the display of locally based production, also reveals high profile international artists. As some of the most successful in balancing these two strategies of diversity and particularity, he highlights the Johannesburg Biennial of 1997, by Okwui Enwezor, and the 9th Istanbul Biennial, by Charles Esche and Vasif Kortun.

2.3.2 In Chapter 2 – ‘Biennial fatigue’, Niemojewski quotes Laura Cumming from the Observer newspaper in 2020, who stated that there are “too many” biennials and that “they all look the same”, citing also a persistent sense of regret, worry, exhaustion and frustration during visits to biennials in light of the impossibility of seeing and absorbing all works. In a series of brief sub-chapters, Niemojewski introduces the general reader to several key concepts and questions for understanding the typology of biennials, from the diversity of their models, strategies and audiences, to the specifics of their spatio-temporal frameworks. In ‘They all look the same’, he seeks to dismantle the supposed similarity of the set of proposals; in ‘The Biennial Clique’, he argues against simplistic methodologies that sustain the discourse of their homogenisation; in ‘The Curatorial Framework and display strategies: site-specificity’, he addresses the different levels of context-responsiveness, dividing biennials into categories of phenomenological site-specificity, social/institutional site-specificity, and discursive site-specificity; in ‘Curatorial frameworks and display strategies: time-specificity’, he proposes the biennial as a place for the “discovery” of the new, of the up to date, diagnosing rare historically oriented biennials (excluding here some more recent biennials that mix historical works with recent production, and that, according to the author, follow the genealogy of Catherine David’s revisionism); and finally, in ‘Is there such a thing as Biennial Art?’, he underlines the populist temptations that result in the production of icon-works and symbolic images for the press, confusing art with entertainment and mass tourism. On this last point, Niemojewski considers that this fashion for the spectacular and the experiential has been also absorbed by museums, galleries and

even art fairs, seeking to create an urge to travel to a particular place for a first-hand experience. Noting that these kinds of works are often co-produced by museums, the author states that it is therefore difficult to establish whether biennials are mirroring global fashions or, as is commonly and sceptically said, driving them.

2.3.3 In Chapter 3 – ‘Biennials and art-world hegemonies: from resistance to conformity and back again’, Niemojewski underlines that, since it is impossible to have direct experience of the hundreds of biennials that take place and recur around the world, academic articles, press reviews and institutional narratives are key resources for understanding them and establishing their reputation, identity and personality. He then outlines three possible generic identities for biennials, proposing a case study for each. First, the oppositional biennial, or the so called “biennials of resistance” –cynical, provocative and disruptive—whose rhetoric challenges hegemonic narratives, taking as his case study the creation of the La Habana biennial. Secondly, the aspirational biennial, a biennial instrumentalised as an economic engine and an instrument of soft power, exemplifying it with the case of the simultaneous occurrence, in time and space, of the Singapore Biennial and the Showcase Singapore Art Fair, a coincidence that challenged the boundaries between general public and buyers, openness and exclusivity, and cultural and commercial exchange, making what are usually only implicit phenomena explicit. Lastly, he posits the biennial which reaches beyond the aspirational, the engineered biennial instrumentalised to serve non-artistic interests from the moment of its planning, referring to the Abu Dhabi project—genetically assembled by managers and economic consultants for a Biennial Park simulacrum of the Giardini (whose structure is already obsolete) —and the Desert X franchise from California to Al’-Ula.

2.3.4 In Chapter 4 – ‘Biennials after the social turn: the unfulfilled promises of social betterment and exhibitions by other means’, Niemojewski contextualises this turn in the mid-1990s, when contemporary art production began to embrace social concerns more than aesthetic ones, and many artists, notably Tania Bruguera, Jeremy Deller and Francis Alys, moved from representing society to wanting to intervene in and transform it. Sceptics would say that this socially engaged art has been absorbed by biennials, which are themselves unproductive platforms for political intervention insofar as they are essentially directed at the market and non-politicised institutions. Joshua Decter even questions the ethics of this integration, pointing out that directors and curators set expectations that biennials simply cannot meet. The role of the international curator then becomes pejorative: a cosmopolitan without an independent ideological or political point of view, working in alliance with the homogenising forces of globalisation. Niemojewski illustrates this with the contradiction of Ralph Rugoff, whose pragmatism, attested to in his statement that “any radical statement the curator makes usually ends up as a headline rather than an actual political proposition”, is encapsulated by the insertion of the work *Barca Nostra*, by Christoph Buchel, in the edition of the Venice Biennale Rugoff directed. The artist brought to the biennale the fishing boat that sank between Lebanon and Sicily with hundreds of emigrants on board, exhibiting it without any context or framing, a gesture of displacement that was widely criticised as a controversial, offensive and inappropriate work commemorating a tragedy.

The author invokes as case studies well-known self-critical projects born out of growing scepticism about the relevance and effectiveness of responding to urgent social and political issues. Often dealing with crises, censorship, self-censorship and boycott, these projects even purport to negate and dematerialise their straight exhibition format, transforming themselves instead into places of debate. First, by means of a political rally, which declared the context of the Berlin Biennale suitable for socio-political actions, and highlighting the 2012 edition directed by Artur Zmijewski as the most ambitious in validating the biennale’s potential not only for presentations of social practices but as a platform for political intervention, it was the biennale most criticised by sceptics and enthusiasts alike. Secondly, by means of an art school, presenting the project proposed for

the 6th edition of Manifesta in Cyprus, the most engaged of biennials, which was conceived as a temporary art school with references to the Black Mountain College and the Bauhaus. Envisioning some 90 participants over 12 weeks in Nicosia, then Europe's last divided city, the utopian and radical project failed legally, with its outcome formalised under the terms of the judgement that led to its cancellation. Thirdly, by means of a reconnaissance, as in the proposal for the Riwaq Biennial in Palestine in 2005, where, in response to the hostile environment and the absence of infrastructure, Charles Esche curated the Gatherings programme, a series of visits to cultural sites and studios which brought international guests into contact with the territorial fragmentation of the region and the assumption of unrestricted mobility by contemporary art agents. Fourthly and finally, by means of a void, when Ivo Mesquita proposed, with a radical curatorial gesture unsupported by later official censorship, an exhibition pause, a quarantine that emptied the space of the biennale, framed as an institution in need of a total re-evaluation, both locally and globally.

2.3.5 Chapter 5, titled 'fermata', addresses the interruption to the calendar and organisational dynamics of biennials on account of the COVID-19 pandemic. The suspension forces Niemojewski to rethink their purpose, with the author accepting biennials as too big, too fast, too populist, too diplomatic, and as having often served to naturalise and amplify existing social inequalities rather than address them. For the first time in the book, the author draws a parallel between the proliferation of biennials and the more recent proliferation of fairs, pointing out that the boundaries between the two have become dangerously blurred, with an excessively short circuit between production and absorption. The author uses the case studies presented to argue that, while they cannot solve the dilemmas of globalisation, biennials can nevertheless be vigilant and innovative, by adopting a dynamic of trial and error. He argues that most new biennials rightly choose the hyper-local, using this deep contextualisation to argue that there are too many biennials, and that we should seek to develop events with less travel, less homogenisation, more sustainability and more social impact. Finally, he proposes a change to both the meaning and tone of the discourse on biennials, with fewer sensationalist, emotive, exaggerated, cynical and sarcastic arguments.

3. Concluding Remarks

Double Trouble discusses the main features of the art market, biennials and their traditional field of interaction, deconstructing them in the process. It particularly emphasises the common ground both have been able to develop, by highlighting intersecting characteristics that previously distinguished them. It is a very rich volume, well documented, with challenging perspectives and new insights that contribute to blurring inherited historical and sociological boundaries. This helps us to understand the mistrust art dealers have held since the 19th century in promoting artists, an image that needed several decades to change, and the strategies artists used to promote themselves, instead. It also helps us to learn about the mechanisms of legitimation that were developed and that exist behind exhibitions, "with and without commercial scope", measuring the artist's success and fostering the market economy. The volume offers an opportunity to further debate the expansion of art fairs and biennials globally, complementing the scholar's recent literature on the subject.

Within this common ground, blurring distinctions between fairs and biennials, lies the centre of analysis in the volume authored by Paco Barragán. *From Roman Feria to Global Art Fair* is a book on the genealogy of art fairs and biennials and their heterogenous contemporary statuses. The author supports his narrative with an up-to-date bibliography. In addition to its colloquial tone, his writing becomes somewhat odd at times when addressed directly to the reader, and even impolite on the occasions where he uses an unfriendly undertone to refer to 'academia', particularly in the phrase 'Western academia'. With the investigative

enthusiasm of a Sherlock Holmes, Barragán denounces misused terms like ‘biennial’ in recent scholarship, incorrect concepts and other mistakes. It is, however, odd that such a critical voice suffers from an absence of rigor itself, undervaluing the relevance of sources, particularly primary ones. Pedagogically, the contribution of Barragán could be stronger if the author explained his choice of subjects to analyse over such an extended chronological period, suffering, as it does, from some significant gaps. His narrative is reduced to a linear succession of (handpicked) events, reducing historical complexity to a commonplace. We may ask what happened in these gaps between centuries and geographies? Wasn’t there an interest in art circulation, in the art market, in acquisitions, or even in commissions? Such a comprehensive spectrum runs the risk of being analysed superficially. In any case, however, the book provides a timely critical overview of a hot topic, framed within a perspective that helps decentralise the mainstream narrative.

Finally, in his broad overview of the Biennial Culture of the last 30 years, Niemojewski takes up the term biennialization to characterise the proliferation of biennials, drawing attention to their essentialist, reductive and stereotypical usages, and seeking to dismantle and complexify these. Examining both positive and negative aspects, he summarises that enthusiasts see biennials as decentralising and pluralising cultural circulation, introducing new topographies and non-Western artists; while sceptics question the integrity and relevance of these changes, pointing out dilemmas primarily in relation to the art market.

In the introduction to the book, Marcus Vernhagen, the author of *Flows and Counterflows: Globalisation in Contemporary Art* (Stenberg Press, 2017) and senior lecturer at Sotheby’s Institute of Art, begins by pointing out the commonplaces and contradictions of the art world and international biennials, emphasising the importance of the local versus the risk of homogenisation. However, he fails to diagnose the generic stability and consistency of that exhibition format in writings on biennials, which Carlos Basualdo addressed so well in 2007 in *The Unstable Institution*. Aligned with both, Niemojewski condemns the simplification of the phenomenon of biennials through blind quantification, while defending their irregular, complex and idiosyncratic characters. He thus sustains their incomparability on a global scale and advocates the impossibility of a total understanding outside of their specific inscriptions in given contexts or local communities. The hyper-local, he argues, can have an effective and positive social impact.

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